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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to survey the affective and cognitive progress of three classes of pre-first grade transitional students. An introduction discusses the issue of social promotion, or the promotion of a student regardless of the student's degree of mastery of the previous level, as opposed to grade retention. In an extensive literature review, several topics are discussed. These include: (1) students' developmental readiness; (2) the use of grade retention as opposed to transitional classes; (3) pre-first grade transitional classes; and (4) the pre-first grade curriculum. In the study, students' affective and cognitive skills were assessed by means of questionnaires distributed to parents of pre-first grade transitional students and first grade students who had been in pre-first grade the previous year. Questionnaires were also distributed to teachers of first, second, and third graders who had previously been in pre-first grade. Parents overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction with their child's progress and self-confidence. Teachers of first and second graders rated the former pre-first grade students high in academic placement in their class; high in reading group placement; and high in self-confidence. An appendix contains the five questionnaires. A bibliography of 28 items is provided. (BC)

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RESEARCH AND EVALUATION OF A PRE-FIRST TRANSITIONAL CLASSROOM

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Backround

The American school system was organized into an age graded structure during the period of 1848 - 1870. This was felt to be a creative and significant advance appropriate to the preceptions and educational needs of the time (Goodlad and Anderson, 1963). Age graded education assumed that children can be logically grouped together by age and taught a specific hierarchy of skills for one year. Because it was believed that the children would retain and master these skills, they would then move on to the next grade (Anderson, 1971).

The expectations of the graded system presented the problem of what to do when a child had not mastered the criterion skill development for a designed grade (Cook and Clymer, 1962). Grade retention or non promotion was soon adopted and remains one of the universal intervention strategy for dealing with below grade level achievement (Zinski, 1983).

An enormous amount of research has been undertaken to evaluate grade repetition or grade retention, since the concept of grades was initiated in Boston in 1848 making chronological age the main criterion for grade placement, expected academic performance, and pupil behaviors. A seven year study performed in a school district of five thousand pupils reported by Keyes in 1911, then in a 1970 research project that involved twelve thousand students reported by Godfrey, the "overwhelming majority of the studies revealed that not only is this practiced retention of no benefit to the child, but often it has proven to be harmful" (Turley, 1982).

Modifications. Numerous school modifications in the age graded system were developed and implemented since the 1870's. This was an attempt to give the age graded system more flexibility. Among these modifications were ability grouping, specialized programs, retention, social promotion, and the nongraded schools.

Ability Grouping. One such example of modifications was grouping students according to ability levels in the hope of creating a more appropriate learning setting. Specialists in reading, speech and mathematics were assigned to schools to develop remedial and enrichment programs.

Special programs were created for disadvantaged, retarded, handicapped and gifted children. The basis for promotion was shifted from achievement alone, so that age and maturity factors were taken into consideration. Nevertheless, such changes have in general proved to be inadequate, either because of poorly implemented programs or because of inherent practical limitations (Anderson, 1971).

Grade Retention. Despite the long history and extensive studies that were done on grade retention, the issue has remained as controversial as ever. In an educational system that has been generally geared to judge performance of students according to acceptable achievements at each grade level, the most popular and apparent remedy for failing students has been retention (King, 1984).

Futhermore, say critics of grade retention, the stigma of flunking has been damaging to the social and personal development of low-achieving students; it has started a snowballing cycle of failure that may extend into adult life (King, 1984).

Social Promotion. When a second failure of skill mastery in a grade level was determined and it was feared the second failure would increase the risk of drop outs or that the age of the student would become a factor, social

promotions became a policy. In social promotion, a student is moved to the next grade level regardless of the fact that the previous level had not been mastered.

Proponents of social promotion believed that simple grade repetition does no more good for academic achievement than promotion to the next grade. Instead of being given remedial help, repeaters are most often recycled through a program that was inappropriate for them the first time and may be equally inappropriate and of less interest to them the second time (King, 1984).

Seldon has reported that current educational debate reflects a national dissatisfaction with the ineffectiveness of the social promotion policy and an acceptance of the effectiveness of a rigid grade standards policy (1971).

> Supporters of continuous promotion would probably have emphasized the student's emotional and social needs. Supporters of grade standards would probably have emphasized the value of academic achievement. The values of the grade standards policy are currently on the ascent. Educators that advocated either the continuous promotion policy or the grade standards policy

would not have found significant support for their positions in research literature (Seldon, 1982).

In an article written for ERIC that summarized the research that has been done to date on grade retention and social promotion, Lindelow (1962) synthesized the arguments of proponents of retention:

> Students who do not understand the material at one grade have found it difficult or impossible to benefit from material at the next level. Retention has given slow or maladjusted students time to come up to grade level and reduced the range of abilities within each grade. Retention has been seen by many educators as an appropriate remedy for students who are immature (King, 1984).

As teachers and administrators faced problems of failing students they developed other alternatives to the dilemma of either promotion or retention. Alternatives have also been suggested by many researchers (King, 1984).

Non-graded. Elementary schools that were non-graded resulted from the continuous attempt to overcome certain limitations of the age graded system. This plan was based on the theoretical assumption that the primary responsibility of the school is to help each individual

student develop his/her full potential for intellectual, physical, social, and civic accomplishment (Anderson, 1971). What this has entailed is offering different types of learning programs simultaneously. Learning in turn should take place with minimum interpersonal competition and maximum competition of self. This program has emphasized a "learner centered" philosophy. Each individual student should reach his/her full potential by being provided with learning opportunities appropriate to their needs.

By eliminating the system of promotion from one grade to the next, nongraded schools have tried to create a setting which provided for individual differences and allowed each student to experience a continuity of learning and achievement not usually possible in a age graded system (Anderson, 1971). The ungraded school emphasized the individual, not the group.

Conclusion. American schools have continued an age graded curriculum. Instruction is generally directed towards the group and not the individual.

> Despite nearly a century of research and experiences that argued for the contrary, students in age graded schools are still expected to adjust to the system. The system has not adjusted to the

students. Pupils are expected to learn the subject matter assigned to the group at a rate determined by the teacher. Well-defined standards for each grade continued to be used as a yardstick for measuring pupil progress, and when grade standards are not met, it is generally assumed that the student is at fault (Anderson, 1982).

Gesell explained that it is futile for a child to be exposed to a task that is above his/her developmental level.

The questionable effectiveness of school modifications as reported above as strategies for incoporating flexiblity to the age graded school, warrants investigation into the alternative of transitional classes.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to survey the affective and cognitive progress of three classrooms of pre-first transitional students. The longitudinal study surveyed the students from 1986-87 through the third grade, the class of 1987-88 through the second grade and the class of 1988-89 through the first grade. The study examined the students cognitive and affective skills through analysis of data compiled from parent questionaires and teacher questionaires. Teacher-made assessment tests were given in kindergarten and in the pre-first transitional room.

POPULATION

The population of this study was located in a moderately sized school system in a midwestern rural state. The population came from an inner city primary school that contained kindergarten through the third grade. The three year study included: 41 students, 36 parents, and 30 teachers.

According to the demographic study of this school district completed in 1987, the area from which this school

draws is, for the most part, low income, welfare, transient, Native American, and from single-parent homes.

METHODOLOGY

The information was gathered by sending questionnaires to the succeeding grade level teachers seeking their assessment of the transitional student's achievement after completion of the transitional experience. Questionaires were also sent to the parents of children presently in pre-first and to the parents of first grade students that had attended the pre-first transitional grade the previous year. The questionaires asked their opinion of the effectiveness of the transition grade.

The three years of transitional students each year following the transitional experience were tracked for achievement. Teacher made assessment tests were used to determine growth during the pre-first transitional year.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Pre-first transitional program. A 1/2 step promotion between kindergarten and first grade. Special intermediary grade level that schools have created for children who are not ready to be promoted to the next grade.

Pre-cognitive skills. The academic skill a child enters school with. These may include: counting readiness skills, ability to cut, color or informal writing, reading readiness skills, etc.

Pre-affective skills. The child's eagerness to learn, the child's self-esteem and self-worth when he/she enters school.

Developmental level. The age at which a child is behaving as a total organism - a fuctioning age.

Chronological age. The amount of time that has elapsed since an individual's birthdate.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited to the population in this study. It should not be used as a comparison to any other group of transition students.

PREFACE

I remember one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath...in vain.

It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wing should have been a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and a few seconds later died in the palm of my hand.

That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a

mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm (Kazantzakis, 1952).

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

Developmental Readiness

Learning is a normal biological function and a natural human condition. People who are ready to learn do not need to be coaxed or prodded (Jensen, 1969). Given the opportunity and the appropriate conditions, including readiness, children simply learn (Jensen, 1969). It is generally assumed that learning occurs best when people are ready to learn and that without being ready learning will not occur (Sawyer, 1975). It is also assumed that a major component of readiness is maturation, based on biological growth. Each child is unique and each child has an individual rate of development (King, 1984).

If a child is not ready developmentally he/she will probably fail to learn. The child who is placed in school before he/she is ready and asked to perform at a level beyond his/her abilities, no matter how hard the child tries he/she cannot do as well as expected (Rihl, Jordel, 1988). The risks of delaying instruction are very minimal compared to the risks of forcing instruction on a non-ready child. The importance of the first year of school cannot be

over-emphasized. It is a time when the child forms attitudes about school and himself which he/she will carry with them for the rest of their lives. His/her entire school career is built upon this foundation. It is the responsibility of educators to provide the child with a strong foundation based on his/her individual needs (Price, 1972).

What students believe about themselves vitually affects every aspect of their behavior and learning. An individual's self concept is developed as a result of the experiences he/she has had. By the time a child reaches school age, self concept is quite well formed. Reactions to learning and to school success or failure will be determined by the beliefs and attitudes he/she has about themselves. The most important ideas that an individual will ever possess are those that he/she will have about himself (Rihl & Jordel, 1988).

The most effective reinforcement for learning or the behaviors that promote learning is the child's own perception of his increasing mastery of the skill he/she is trying to acquire. When this perception is lacking, learning bogs down, and external reinforcement or rewards are usually inadequate to maintain cognitive learning. The child's efforts are rewarded, but not the cognitive

processes that lead to further mastery; and the end result is frustration and turning off in the particular learning situation (Jensen, 1969).

The idea is that each new step in learning is dependent upon the prior acquition of certain subskills and that learning takes place most efficiently when we insure that all relevant subskills have been mastered prior to the next-to-be-learned skill in the learning hierarchy. This is Gagne's formulation of cumulative learning (1965, 1968).

The 'back-to-basics' movement with its emphasis on injecting more academic study into the curriculum at an earlier age, should not be allowed to overpower our awareness that not all children are ready for formal academic study at the same time (Friesen, 1984).

Steps need to be taken to prevent failure in the first place. The point is to help students as soon as possible so that they have successful school experiences.

In a 1979 reported by Horacek it was suggested that educational policy makers support the following positions:

> (1) that students be evaluated as an integral part of instruction rather than an external reward or punishment for low achievement (2) that evaluation and reporting systems be furnished as feedback to help teachers improve learning; that they be

> compatible with new approaches to the learning process (3) that school organization be sufficiently flexible to promote continuous progress and to provide special resources and alternative programs for students that are not achieving rather than recycling them through the same grade (Horacek, 1979).

Children come to school with enormously different interests, aptitudes, and backround experiences. They cannot be made to adapt to a uniform curriculum (Shepard & Smith, 1986). A child may be intellectually ready for schoolwork, but incapable of sitting still, of listening to instructions, of following directions and of adjusting to the school environment. It is obvious that this child is not ready to undertake formal education in a school setting.

"Readiness" is one of the few technical terms that has a direct counterpart in the nontechnical language of ordinary conversion. The concept is associated with maturational issues, development, and environment stimulation. It is advisable to realize that readiness refers to a type of learning experience, not to a given subject.

School readiness has been defined as the ability to cope with the school environment physically, socially and

emotionally as well as academically without undue stress and to sustain in that environment (Gesell Institue, 1980). Readiness is largely a matter of growth, and it is not recommended that you try to speed up the process. Often, the issue involved is TIME, not ability.

The readiness concept has been particularly appropriate for all those interested in providing the best educational experiences, one that matches biological competence with the demands of the environment (Gordon, 1983).

There are two adverse effects when readiness is ignored: (1) the learner simplifies the process and thus the learning is superficial and, (2) the learner "turns off" or rejects learning, often with long lasting effects (Jensen, 1969).

Learning readiness aspects concern the need to have already acquired the component subskills underlying the next level in the learning hierarchy and the need to have reached the level of cognitive development necessary for the integration of the subskills into a fuctional whole (Jensen, 1969).

Developmental readiness is: (1) the ability to adapt or adjust to standards of group behavior, (2) the ability to be away from home for a long period of the day, (3) the ability to relate to other children, (4) the ability to be capable

of meeting work standards set by the teacher without becoming upset and evidencing undue anxiety, (5) the ability to be a happily coping child in a school environment (Hedges, 1977).

Developmental readiness is the age at which a child is behaving as a total organism-a functioning age (Carll & Richards, 1977). Developmental readiness is seen as a total development, a holistic process involving factors from all areas of the personality (Brenner, 1971; Ogletree, 1972; Carl and Richards, 1977; Ames, 1978; Ames and Chase, 1981; Turley, 1982).

Developmental growth patterns differ from person to person. Each stage dictates a person's readiness to attempt certain tasks. It is futile to expose a child to tasks that are above his/her developmental level. It may be necessary to hold back a child until they are ready to assume an appropriate stage of readiness. It is advisable to realize that readiness refers to a type of learning experience, not to a given subject.

"Overplacement" is viewed by developmentalists as one of the major causes of school failure (Carll & Richard 1971; Ilg & Ames, 1965). Overplacement means a child is "in over his/her head". His/her grade level is imposing pressures which inhibit growth in some area, whether it be social,

physical well-being, emotional stability, or academic learning (Zinski, 1983). The overplaced child is frustrated.

"The point is when we place a child in a situation for which he/she is not ready, we inhibit his/her chances of becoming the whole person he/she was meant to be" (Carll & Richard, 1971).

If a child is not ready developmentally he/she will probably fail to learn. The child who is placed in school before he/she is ready and is asked to perform at a level beyond his/her abilities, no matter how hard the child tries he/she cannot do as well as expected (Rihl, Jordel, 1988). Will the child be developmentally ready to have sustained the stress of formal classroom education? No matter how intelligent the child maybe, entrance into school before they are developmentally ready could be setting the student up for failure (King, 1984).

It is developmental readiness, proponents claim, and not an early start, that will assure any student the strength to continue to fuction comfortably in the school environment and to sustain the tasks of academic learning (King, 1984). Developmental readiness advocates contend that many school failures can be attributed to children who are intellectually capable to their overall immaturity. It

is their contention that, given the "gift of time", these children would eventually mature and be ready to begin formal education (King, 1984).

The behaviorists work to design environments that maximize the child's skill and thereby attempt to promote readiness. Advocates of the cognitive-developmental perspective, believe that the child's maturation cannot be accelerated, but that development is best promoted in environments that provide cognitive challenges to active children.

Gesell was a pioneer in child development. (The Gesell Institute of Child Development is located in New Haven, Connecticut.) A major focus of Gesell's work has been children in the school setting. They have been cautioning parents and teachers alike that school must not treat all children as ready for the same things at the same time. Differences in rates of growth should help to plan and guide school structure and curriculum. Schools should be made to fit children as they are, not the other way around.

The Gesell tests were first published in 1928 by Dr. Arnold Gesell of the Yale Clinic of Child Development. Gesell spent much time documenting the distinctive behavorial characteristics of each age of human development. These measurement have shown to a respected and accurate

indicator of a child's level of maturation (Hood, 1982). The Gesell School Readiness Screening Test does not have one answer or behavior that determines a child's developmental age. The test will not measure a child's intelligence quotient or level of social development. The test primarily is a placement tool that has measured a child's school readiness.

School readiness has been defined as the ability to cope with the school environment physically, socially and emotionally as well as academically without undue stress and to sustain in that environment (Gesell Institute, 1980). Gesell believed school readiness is determined by a behavioral age, not a chronological or mental age.

According to Gesell the step between kindergarten and first grade is a giant one. A six-year-old may be chronologically ready for first grade , but may not be developmentally ready. In first grade, a child has to be ready, not only academically, but also developmentally, socially, physically, and emotionally. The child may have functioned at a five-year-old level in some areas and that would have contributed to his/her possible lack of success in first grade. Gesell's studies show large numbers of children are not ready for first grade. Gesell suggested that over 50% of all school failures could have been

prevented if children were properly placed according to their developmental age (Ilg. & others, 1978).

By the end of kindergarten, some children are developmentally beyond kindergarten but not ready to be successful in first grade. A transitional grade program is defined as a half step progression between kindergarten and first grade. It is essentially a program for children of normal intelligence that require more time to develop the maturity needed for success in first grade. It is designed to serve children whose learning problem is that they are not developmentally ready for a whole step progression into first grade.

The readiness program philosophy according to Gesell as Hardman explains is that:

> "It has been Gesell's position that children should start school and be subsequently promoted on the basis of their developmental age rather than their chronological age. Assessment of developmental age before entrance into school has been the preventive tool which has made a substantial difference in a child's overall success (1983).

Soviet psychologists and Polish researchers have confirmed Gesell's findings in child developmental stages

(Pheasant, 1985). Both the Soviet psychologists and Polish researchers felt that many children are overplaced in their grade level. There are developmental sequences that must be followed in order for success in school. Instuction must match the developmental level of the child (Pheasant, 1985). A better match makes for a higher possibility that a child's educational environment and readiness is enhanced (Pheasant, 1985).

Development is both genetic inheritance and environmental effects. Advocates of this perspective assume that development results from the organism's own actions. In short, according to this perspective, development occurs from the interaction of biological, environmental, and organism-generated features. Cognitive-developmentalists, include Piaget (1970), Bruner (1960), and Kohlberg (1969).

Piaget's work, while coming from a different perspective, reaffirmed the concept of developmental readiness for school that was demonstrated by Gesell. Piaget reflects his concern about educating children on the basis of chronological age. Development is the result of both genetic inheritance and environmental effects. Development results from the organism's own actions. According to this perspective, cognitive developmentalists believe development occurs from the interaction of

biological, environmental, and organism gererated features (Turley, 1982). Piaget's preoperational level is a period of rapid language development. By using this to the child's advantage and exposing him/her to as many varied ways of expanding language as possible.

Piaget stresses the development of motor skills and cognitive growth; curriculums should also include many academic readiness activities (Pheasant, 1985).

According to Clarizio et al. (1981) the majority of evidence to date has indicated that specific training, does not speed up the stages of intellectual development identified by Piaget. The amount of improvement brought about through intervention is probably limited since the stages of development cannot be compressed into too short a time.

In a research study performed by Marian King it was concluded: (1) chronological age gives no assurance of a child's readiness to undertake schoolwork, (2) children who are delayed in overall maturation can be predicted to fail academically, (3) repeating a school year for reasons of immaturity is a "gift of time" for the child (4) developmental readiness screening test can predict future academic success or failure (1984).

Learning readiness aspects concern the need to have already acquired the component subskills underlying the next level in the learning hierarchy and the need to have reached the level of cognitive development necessary for the integration of the subskills into a fuctional whole (Jensen, 1969).

A child may be intellectually ready for schoolwork, but incapable of sitting still, of listening to instructions, of following directions, and of adjusting to the school environment. It is obvious that this child is not ready to undertake formal education in a school setting. Children come to school with enormously different interests, aptitudes, and backround experiences. They cannot be made to adapt to a uniform curriculum (Shepard & Smith, 1986).

It is generally assumed that learning occurs best when people are ready to learn and that without being ready little learning will not occur (Sawyer, 1975). It is also assumed that a major component of readiness is maturation, based on biological growth.

When our children are infants we respect behavior age. Though in our culture the "average" baby creeps at around 9 months of age, if a 9-month old does not creep we do not require that he do so, nor do we penalize him for not being ready to creep. How quickly we forget the wisdom and

patience that we show with our infants! When it comes time for schooling, behavior age plus parents' and teachers' observations of a child's maturity and individuality should be the factors which determine what we may expect. For many children school failure could be prevented by determining and acting upon the behavior age of the child and supplementing this with information from parents and/or previous school experience. An increasing number of parents are beginning to respect the concept that behavior age not birthday age should determine school placement.

Children with a true developmental lag may be shy, insecure or "I can't" children. Sometimes they'll have difficulties with fine motor coordination which shows up in their writing and cutting skills, sometimes they'll have difficulties with gross motor coordination which makes them seem awkward and sometimes they'll have speech and language difficulties. Often they're the September-December babies who are a few months behind the other kindergarteners (Smardin, 1986).

Reasons given for delay in maturation, range from physical causes (i.e. difficult delivery, early childhood illnesses, and surgeries), to personality factors (i.e. self-concept, character, attitudes towards others), and family factors (i.e. cohesiveness of the family, parenting,

relationship with siblings, emotional unrest, divorce of parents, separation from parent(s), transiency, literacy of siblings and parents, socio-economic status of the family) (Brenner, 1971; Lieberman, 1980; Oberklaid and Levine, 1980; Sinatra, 1983).

Retention Vs. Transitional Classes

The vast majority of kindergarten teachers believe retention programs have benefits that far outweigh their risks. However, there is no evidence to substantiate this belief (Shepard & Smith). When given the choice between promotion and retention, the data favors promotion.

Retention cannot be expected to cure all school problems (Scott & Ames, 1969). What accounts for the widespread belief in the efficiency of retention is that educators continue to believe that retention will improve achievement and adjustment because in their own experiences they are not able to carry out an experiment to see how a retained child 'would have done' had he/she been promoted.

A major problem with grade retention is that it is an intervention stragedy that is implemented after the fact (Zinski, 1983.) Remediation comes after the child has failed. The retained child is recycled through a program

that was inappropriate for them the first time and that may be equally inappropriate and of less interest to them the second time (Jackson, 1975). Children do not learn more by repeating a grade, often they learn less than those who are promoted in spite of low achievement (Billman, 1988). It has been difficult to say whether these students would have performed better if promoted (Baenen & Hopkins, 1988).

Retention may cause low self-esteem and the feeling that the child has "failed" (Billman, 1988). The affective outcomes for the retained child in most cases are negative. Retained students when asked about retention described it as "sad" and a "upsetting" experience. It was rated by students just slightly less stressful than going blind or losing a parent.

Research indicates that a child who is having serious academic difficulties in one grade is likely to continue having difficulties if promoted to the next grade (Bocks, 1977). However, research does not clearly indicate how repetition of a grade is likely to reduce these difficulties.

First grade has the highest retention rate (Baenen & Hopkins, 1988). The child has already experienced the frustration and degradation of not being able to compete. Proponents of developmental readiness programs, like Gesell

(1928) believe the time to intervene for failure is before it happens.

In a transitional grade the child does not have to fail in order to receive help. Transitional grade programs prevent failure by movement up 1/2 a step or grade level. Grade repetition emphasizes failure by not moving a grade level.

Not enough research information has been available comparing retention vs. a transitional program. What reseach has existed, calls into question the efficiency of such programs compared with grade retention.

Statistics have shown that children that have repeated a grade and students that have attended a transitional pre-first program have shown little diffences in Iowa Tests Of Basic Skills (ITBS) when tested at the end of first grade. This data has been considered suggestive not conclusive because transitional sample sizes are small and not randomly assigned to groups (Baenen & Hopkins, 1988). It is clear that practitioners view these programs more favorably over retention.

Pre-first Transitional Classroom

Whenever developmental readiness for kindergarten is questioned, a recomendation is made to parents to delay the child's entrance. When the child has already been admitted with or without prior development screening tests and has shown signs of overplacement or symptoms of academic/social maladjustment, a recommendation is made to parents to retain their child in the same grade for another year or place the child in a transitional pre-first room. This is done even when they are academically proficient, so as to allow the child more time to grow developmentally and to adjust more comfortably to the school environment and thus avoiding the dangers of "burn out" (King, 1984).

The readiness concept has been particularly appropriate for all those interested in providing the best educational experiences. One that matches biological competence with the demands of the environment (Gordon, 1983). "If students' needs warrant it, the readiness room should be available. The point is to help children as soon as possible so that they will have a successful school experience" (Pheasant, 1985).

Gesell has suggested that a transitional program be offered to children that are not developmentally ready to

move on to the next grade level. If a transitional room was not available, the child should be retained until he/she was developmentally ready to progress (Ilg & Ames 1978). With the questionable effectiveness of retention as a strategy for academic difficulty, an empirical investigation into the alternatives of transitional classes would appear warranted.

The rationale that underlies the transitional class drew heavily from Gesell. Gesell purported that human beings, beginning at infancy, advanced through several development stages. These stages are not dictated solely by chronological age.

At a time of considerable national concern about the "at risk" student, it seems premature to recommend the abandonment of programs that have significant effects upon those kindergarten students, who, when left to compete with their cohorts, continue to be maginal into third grade. Instead of advocated universal abandonment of such programs, a more positive approach would be to try to discover the ingredients for success in those programs which produce results (Carlson, 1986).

Children selected for the pre-first transitional program are selected because they are "at risk". These students lag behind their classmates academically and socially. Children who may benefit from spending a year in

a transitional classroom generally exhibit one or more of the following characteristics: hyperactivity, perceptual and or motor deficiencies, daydreaming, short attention span, impulsiveness, memory/thinking disorders, perseveration, speech/language/hearing disorders, general poor attitude towards self or school, learning decifits in reading, math, writing, or spelling (Solem, 1981).

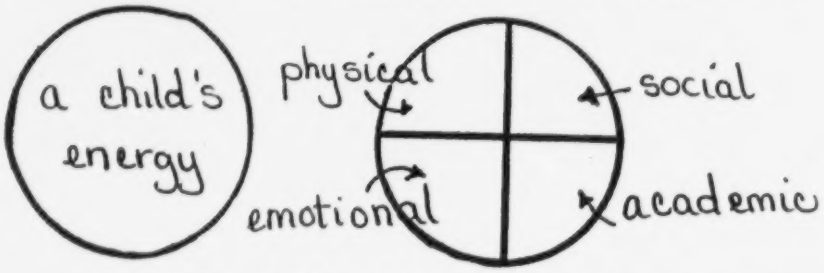
The areas responsible for poor transition in first grade are: (1) increased expectations of the grade one curriculum, (2) health/general readiness, (3) immaturity and or a late birthday (Mayfield, 1980). Signs of overplacement may be: nightmares, not wanting to go to school, feeling or saying "I'm dumb", frequently going to the bathroom, frequently going to sharpen pencils, nail biting, can't find anything, easily distracted, tired, overly stimulated, irritable at home, social problems, cries easily etc.

When the decision to place a child in a transitional room is considered, it is decided by the present teacher, the transitional teacher, the principal and the parent. Parents make the final enrollment decisions.

Readiness programs stress: (1) developmental placement, (2) small class loads with individual attention, (3) no labeling of children, (4) involvement of parental support to

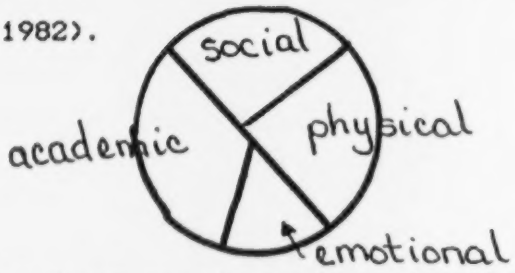
reinforce school efforts (Pheasant, 1985). Readiness programs have provided a rewarding school experience for children who are chronologically six but do not have the development to be successful in the regular first grade course of study. These students that have shown by testing to be "at risk" of retention, are given the opportunity to develop and be successful (Pheasant, 1985).

The point is to help students as soon as possible so that they have successful school experiences. Each child comes to school with a limited amount of energy. This energy is divided into four areas in which school demands are made: (1) physical, (2) social, (3) academic, (4) emotional.



If a six year old child with a six year old body development comes to a first grade class, the child is able to divide his/her energy evenly between the four areas. However, if the six year old child, comes to the first grade class with a five/five and a half year old body development the child must make decisions as to where to expend his/her energy, since there is not enough energy to go around. Thus

certain areas suffer. Skewed or uneven development begins to start (Hall, 1982).



Preventing uneven development needs to be the objective of our educational system. It is the philosophy of the transitional pre-first that each child's development be an even, well balanced progression that allows success socially, emotionally, physically and academically. The transitional program is structured to permit attainment of these goals. Children should be placed in first grade based on their behavioral age rather than their chronological age (Ilg & Ames, 1964).

This program is grounded in developmental theory and research, it has achieved short-range goals. It is still to early to assess its long-range effects (Piele, 1985). Additional research is needed in the area of transitional developmental programs in public schools. We need to assess their impact on academic progress. However, the examples cited suggest that pre-first grade programs may be benefical (Zinski,1983). Curricula must be developed to fit the needs of students rather than to preconceived standards (Rihl & Jordel, 1988).

Teachers have sensed a positive relationship between a student's concept of himself and his performance in school (Purkey, 1970). The pre-first grade program is structured so that the child meets success instead of failure which enables him/her to develop a sense of self-worth and a good self-concept.

Every child should be considered individually, not as a part of a system-wide policy (Goodlad, 1952). Educators must adjust to the needs of the child. One way to do this is to provide alternative situations for children having academic difficulty. The transitional class provides a promising approach to help students who have early learning problems (Wilson, 1979). A pre-first is the most appropriate place to add an additional grade level.

The transition first grade is a full-day nine month program for students who have completed a year of kindergarten, but who need additional help before transferring to a traditional first grade. The unique aspect of transiton rooms is that children diagnosed as "at risk" of failure are identified, given special treatment, and placed back into a heterogeneous setting after a defined length of time.

Names may vary for the transitional grade level between kindergarten and first grade. Names for this grade level

may be: pre-one, transitional one, developmental one, readiness class, pre-first, or junior first.

Children may be selected according to: (1) academic performance, (2) social/emotional maturity, (3) teacher recommendation, (4) birthdate, (5) parent recommendation and approval, (6) student's size, (7) test scores.

Screening tools that may be useful for diagnosing students not developmentally ready for first grade may be: the Brigance K and First Grade Screen (Curriculum Associates, Inc.), the Metropolitan Readiness Test, Level 1 Form P (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), the Gesell Readiness Screening Test from the Gesell Institute of Human Development, Teacher-constructed screening instruments, and speech and language screening instruments (i.e. TOLD, test of language development, level 1 or the PLAI, Preschool Assessment Instrument).

The primary purpose of a transitional pre-first grade is to improve students academic performance and to develop a positive attitude towards learning. The advantages of a pre-first transitional grade level are: (1) giving children more time to mature, (2) giving children more time to master specific skills, (3) a transition class permits more individualized teaching, (4) the prevention of the development of a pattern of failure (Mayfield, 1980).

Three major goals or components of a pre-first are: (1) time to grow and develop at one's own pace, (2) experience through which one can make discoveries about the world and about oneself, (3) acceptance of oneself without condition, (4) respect for the uniqueness of the human being and concentration on the positive abilities already developed as well as those that are emerging (Zinski, 1983).

The Pre-first Curriculum

Every child should be considered individually, not as a part of a system-wide policy (Goodlad, 1952). Educators must adjust to the needs of the child. One way to do this is to provide alternative situations for children having academic difficulty. The transition class provides a promising approach to help students who have early learning problems (Wilson, 1979).

The transitional pre-first program is an example of a successful, innovative program based on child development (Pheasant, 1985). Its instructional program is designed to improve reading and math readiness; to develop oral language and to increase a child's ability to understand spoken language, to listen, and to follow directions. Activities focus on developing gross-motor and eye/hand coordination.

Teachers nuture social and emotional maturity, self-reliance, self-control and cooperation. Development of a healthy self-concept is an essential component of the program (Solem, 1981).

A pre-first transitional curriculum is developmental rather than remedial. It is highly individualized, child centered and uses a hands-on approach. Children learn without pressure and with plenty of elbow room to make mistakes. The curricula is developed to fit the needs of the students rather than to preconceived standards (Rihl & Jordel, 1988). The issue is not so much when to teach as how to do so. Children build confidence, self-esteem and self-worth in a transitional program.

A transitional pre-first grade program needs to include high levels of sensory involvement activities, activities for a shorter length of time, and be diversified in terms of grouping. Students progress socially, emotionally, physically and academically as fast as possible without undue stress or strain (Hood, 1982).

Five major areas that must be considered when teaching a transitional room are: (1) social and emotional development, (2) work habits, (3) perceptual motor skills, (4) reading readiness, (5) math readiness (Hood, 1982).

The teacher's task is to identify how best to assess the relation between the child's current developmental level and the directions the teacher would like the student to take. Usually the better the match between the child and the educational environment, the higher the possibility that readiness will be enhanced. Small group work is perferred to large; individual reaction is preferred to group interaction.

In light of the high degree of variation between curricula and the positive effects of transitional classrooms, the argument moves more towards the success of a particular curriculum or teaching staff, more than for the universal effectiveness of a transitional room. Positive changes in student characteristics could be due to the effect of having something called a transitional class per se (Carlson, 1986).

Conclusion

We need to remind ourselves of what Rousseau once said: "Hold childhood in reverence and do not be in a hurry." The importance of the first year of school cannot be over-emphasized. It is a time when the child forms attitudes about school and himself which he/she will carry

with them for the rest of their lives. His/her entire school career is built upon this foundation. It is the responsibility of educators to provide the child with a strong foundation based on his/her individual needs (Price, 1972).

The "at risk" student becomes the hurried butterfly and victim of the age graded system. They are developmentally not ready to immerge from their cocoon. There continues to be a need to develop programs that teach children in ways that maintain their curiosity, interest, and desire to learn. The fact of the matter is that children of all ages can and do learn. If the material is beyond the child's ability, the child will not learn it as the parent wishes, even though the child will learn something from the exposure. If the consequences for failing to learn information that is beyond the child's ability are nonpunitive, the child will come to realize that the world is filled with interesting opportunities for those ready to meet the challenges (Gordon, 1982).

> "The first step, as you know, has always been what matters most, particularly when we are dealing with those who are young and tender. That is the time when they are easily moulded and when

any impression we choose to make, leaves a permanent mark." (Plato, The Republic)

CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DATA
INFORMATION

The Study

The questionnaires in this study were developed using questions designed by the author that dealt with cognitive and affective performance of the students that had attended a pre-first transitional class during the school years of 1986-87, 1987-88, 1988-89, 1989-1990. A sample of a first, second, and third grade teacher questionnaire and a sample of both parent questionnaires can be found in the Appendix. The questionnaires found in the Appendix were distributed to the parents of current pre-first transitional students and the parents of first grade students that were in pre-first the previous year. The other questionnaires were distributed to first, second, and third grade teachers of students that were in the pre-first one of the four years it has been in existence. The questions in this study are opinions and do not reflect any other transitional program.

This study addressed:

1. post transitional students that were evaluated in the cognitive domain at all grade levels that apply

2. post transitional students that were evaluated in the affective domain at all grade levels that apply

3. evaluations based on opinions of parents as to the effectiveness of a transitional pre-first grade

4. evaluations based on opinions of teachers that have had transitional pre-first graders in their classrooms

Background Information

The targeted population of this study has a high percentage of transient families. A large portion of the children of these families have proven to be culturally deprived, lacking of good role models and educationally deficient. These factors have lead to low pre-cognitive and low pre-affective skills when entering kindergarten.

In this targeted school's kindergarten class, 50 percent of the children have attended headstart on a regular basis (these children have attended headstart for one-two years continually). A small minority of 10 percent have attended a private pre-school. 40 percent of the children have been at home for the first five years of their lives or have attended headstart but not on a regular basis (these children have attended less than half a year). Many in this group have had few cognitive experiences. Many of these children have never used a pencil, colored with crayons, or cut with scissors. Many have never had a parent or an adult read to them (C. Robbin, personal communication, August 29,

1989). 'Walking out of a cave after five years of existence denotes the cognitive experiences of this group of children.

Without the necessary pre-cognitive and pre-affective experiences necessary for success in school these children have become "at risk" of failure in their first school experience. Kindergarten becomes a "catch-up time" for these children but even with a strong language experience program, they still may not be ready for first grade. Pre-first presents an opportunity for these student to build a good foundation for school success by building a strong language experience base, which is necessary for success in reading.

The other group of children that are considered for the pre-first transitional program have shown to be developmentally not ready to move on to first grade. This makes this group of children "at risk" of failure in first grade. The children in pre-first do not have learning disabilities but are developmentally not ready for first grade. Although children of this age group are difficult to assess whether they are developmentally not ready for first grade or the fact that they may have a learning disability. Many times testing is not administered until later in the primary grades. Of the children that were involved in this study it was found that five were tested for learning

disabilities and were placed in special education between the first and third grades. One student was placed in a program for emotionally disturbed children. Six students were placed in Title I, a reading assistance program and one student was placed in a Title I, math tutoring program.

Teacher evaluation and testing began during second semester of kindergarten to determine which students would be "at-risk" in first grade. These children, with parental permission were placed in a transitional pre-first grade classroom and became this study's targeted group.

DATA COLLECTED

QUESTIONS	YES	NO	UNSURE
Are you satisfied with the progress your child has made this past year?	39	0	0
Do you feel our pre-first grade program has improved your child's self-confidence?	36	1	2
Would you recommend pre-first grade to another parent whose child is being considered for retention in kindergarten?	38	0	1

Parent letters were sent out to all students attending pre-first and to parents of first grade students still attending Whittier. A total of 60 questionaires were taken home by students in pre-first grade and first grade during the springs of 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1990. 40 parent questionaires were returned.

QUESTIONS	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Where does ____ place academically with the other children in your class?	12	8	10
What reading group has ____ been placed?	11	10	9
How would you rate ____'s self-confidence?	18	10	2

QUESTIONS	YES	NO	UNSURE
Have you ever had a pre-first student in your class before?	*	*	*
Do you see a difference between a child that has been retained and one that has attended a Pre-first grade program?	20	2	1

The following questionaire was sent to first grade teachers of previous pre-first graders. They were mailed in the following spring after the child had completed three quarters of first grade. 30 questionaires were sent out to three years of previous pre-first graders. The questionaires were sent in 1988, 1989, and 1990 to first grade teachers throughout the Great Falls School District, three questionaires were mailed out of town to first grade teachers of former students that had moved.

The response from these questionaires was helpful in evaluating the successes and difficulties with the pre-first grade curriculum. The questionaires helped to evaluate the success pre-first grade students had in first grade. All 30 questionaires were returned.

QUESTIONS	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Where does _____ place academically with the other children in your class?	8	4	2
What reading group has _____ been placed?	8	3	3
How would you rate _____'s self-confidence?	7	5	2

QUESTIONS	YES	NO	UNSURE
Have you ever had a pre-first student in your class before?	5	4	3
Do you see a difference between a child that has been retained and one that has attended a Pre-first grade program?	8	3	3

This questionaire was sent to second grade teachers of previous pre-first graders. They were mailed in the spring of the year after the child had completed three quarters of second grade. Of the original 18 students that attended second grade during the years of 1989 and 1990, I was able to locate 14 students. 14 questionaires were sent out to second grade teachers throughout the Great Falls School District, no questionaires were mailed out of town.

The response from these questionaires was helpful in evaluating the success pre-first grade students had in second grade. 14 questionaires were returned.

QUESTIONS	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Where does _____ place academically with the other children in your class?	2	2	0
What reading group has _____ been placed?	2	2	0
How would you rate _____'s self-confidence?	2	2	0

QUESTIONS	YES	NO	UNSURE
Have you ever had a pre-first student in your class before?	*	*	*
Do you see a difference between a child that has been retained and one that has attended a Pre-first grade program?	1	1	2

This questionaire was sent to third grade teachers of previous pre-first grade students. They were mailed in the spring of the year after the student had completed three quarters of third grade. Of the original 9 students that attended pre-first during the school year of 1987-88, I was able to locate only 7 students. 7 questionaires were sent out to third grade teachers throughout the Great Falls School District, of the 7 questionaires mailed out only 4 were returned.

The study tracked ten children's progress through the second grade. The results of the study are as follows:

Confidence: good - 6
fair - 3
poor - 1

Overall academics: high - 4
medium-3
low - 3

Reading group: high - 5
medium-2
low - 3

All ten students remained in the same class position both years. Two of the ten students were placed in a special eduacation resource room, as a result they placed low on the survey of overall academics and reading.

There were ten children in the original pre-first transitional classroom in 1986-87, these were children that began and ended the year in the Whittier's pre-first. Four of the ten, are still in the Great Falls School district and the study was able to track these children from first through third grade. What follows is a summary of the progress of four boys that attended pre-first.

P. - P. was a good student in pre-first, he lacked confidence and self-motivation. P.'s teacher in first, second, and third grades reported P. to be in the top 10% of the class, his self-confidence was good and he was a good student.

M. - M. came to pre-first shy and lacking in self-confidence. M. showed by the end of the year his understanding of what was being taught and that he was retaining new material. M.'s first, second, and third grade teachers reported him to be a top student that takes pride in his work. His self-confidence was above average.

D. - In teaching, ever so often, there's a child that steals your heart and that was D. He was extremely shy but their was such sparkle in his eyes. D. did not talk the first semester of kindergarten, not to the teacher or any of the children. It was not surprising when he did not speak to anyone the first six weeks of pre-first. I remember the first time D. raised his hand to answer a question, it must have taken him five minutes to get the entire answer out, but it was well worth waiting for. D. made good progress in pre-first. In first, second, and third grades D. was reported by his teacher as an average reader but confident. As an overall student he was average in classwork. Each year it has been reported that D. was building more confidence but that he was still very shy.

J. - J. was a boy that needed to work on emotional and social adjustments in school and with his peers. J. made good progress academically in pre-first and made strides in his self-control. His first, second, and third grade teachers have reported him to be an average student, he's confident but needs reassurance at times. J. is an average reader but confident.

The Results

The results of this study lean heavily towards the affective domain. Students achieved and found success academically but the student's self-confidence, self-worth and self-esteem are what stands out as the true success of this program. To measure this program academically it would be necessary to do a longitudinal study following a set of students from pre-first grade into fifth grade. The difficulty of this type of study is: How do you do a study on prevention in education?

One aspect that became very apparent in this study but was not apart of the questionaire, dealt with the student in question being "at risk" because of their home environment. A total of 39 pre-first grade students were in this study, all the students were considered "at risk" because of their possible failure in first grade. In this group of 39 students 24 of the children had extenuating circustances that make them more "at risk" than the other children in the study (ie. drug abuse of parents or siblings, physical/ sexual abuse of the child or a parent in the home, parents or sibling that are incarcerated, a parent that is illiterate, the child or parent is blind or deaf, alcoholism in the home, etc.) These startling statistics warrant

investigation into the possibility of counseling as part of the curriculum.

Comments

The transitional pre-first program is a positive 1/2 step movement for the child. If the program is handled positively, the child will not feel as though he/she has failed. Parent and teacher responses to this program have been positive, of all the teachers and parents surveyed only two parents and one teacher felt the program was not worthwhile. Comments of parents and teachers spoke to the the academic advances of the child but the comments that are repeated over and over are those of the child's self-confidence, self-worth, and self-motivation. A sampling of comments follows.

These were comments made in the questionaires by parents of present pre-first grade students and parents of pre-first grade students the following year in first grade.

> The pre-first class enabled my child to grow more emotionally mature and helped him to feel better about himself. I highly recommend it for a child needing more time to grow emotionally, socially and scholastically. I feel by taking the pre-first class _____ is doing extremely well in first grade, it gave him the opportunity to grow and better understand what was being taught and actually enjoy learning. I have seen a tremendous

change in his attitude and his belief in himself. Thank you for giving ____ the opportunity of pre-first. Pre-first gives a child "special time" to mature and develop learning skills, whereby he/she can grow into an academic atmosphere successfully. Bravo! Thank you for helping ____to get a good start and a firm foundation to grow on. ___ has changed so much about so many things. It is all good. I am glad that __ was in your class. She really liked it and has accomplished more than I expected. I feel you did a wonderful job preparing ___ for first grade. ___ is able to retain more of what she learns. I have told other parents about pre-first. I also was told about the pre-first through someone else. I already have (recommended pre-first to other parents).

I polled teachers of previous pre-first students that are located throughout the district discussing the children's progress in their present grade level. This included grades first through third. The following is a sample of comments I received.

I believe the pre-first program is an important one. Many children have never attended any structured situation before kindergarten. The pre-first class gives these students the chance to catch up and figure out the necessary "pre" math and "pre" reading skills. In first grade they are then ready mentally and physically to do first grade work. A pre-first child seems to radiate more positive self-esteem. I wish all children could experience a strong, concrete language experience background. I think the pre-first program does a better job of helping a child be developmentally ready for a regular first grade classroom than 2 years in first grade. The pre-first situation gave ____ the opportunity to attain a solid foundation of readiness skills in reading and math. It also strengthened her oral and written language skills enabling her to be more successful in a regular first grade curriculum. Since I have several repeaters and pre-first graders in this class, I'll take the

> pre-first student anytime. The pre-first student will try harder and stays on task much better than the repeater. I see more self-confidence and self-esteem in the child who has attended pre-first as opposed to being retained.

Of the comments I have received over the past four years, one stands out as the comment that gives the program worth and meaning. It was from a mother that fought the entire year about her daughter's placement in the program. She agreed to the placement because she knew her daughter was unable to function in a first grade class after a trial period. The following spring in first grade, I surveyed her, as I did the other first grade parents. She remarked: "Without a doubt, _____'s self- confidence is seen in her strong desire to learn. She has an excitement to achieve without feeling she failed or flunked. I feel extremely confident! Remember, I so strongly objected in the beginning. I'm thankful for such a program!

Conclusion

The child not developmentally ready for first grade becomes "at risk" and a hurried butterfly. They are the victims of the age graded system because they are developmentally not ready to immerge from their cocoon. There continues to be a need to develop programs that teach children in ways that maintain their curiosity, interest and desire to learn. The fact of the matter is that children of all ages can and do learn (Gordon, 1982).

The comments from parents and teachers gives the pre-first transitional program validity. They help to show that pre-first is attempting to build a strong solid foundation of learning in the children it serves.

APPENDIX

PRE-FIRST GRADE

WHITTIER ELEMENTARY
GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

May 14, 1990

Dear Mr. and Mrs. _____,

I am writing all the parents in my pre-first grade room to ask for an evaluation of this past year. I would like to know your praises, complaints and suggestions. This will help me prepare for my program next year. Would you take a moment to answer three brief questions.

1. Do you feel our pre-first grade program has improved your child's self-confidence?

2. Are you satisfied with the progress your child has made this past year?

3. Would you recommend pre-first grade to another parent whose child is being considered for retention in kindergarten?

Comments: (please use the back)

Thank you for your time and would you return this as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Colleen Busta

PRE-FIRST GRADE

WHITTIER ELEMENTARY
GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

April 9, 1990

Dear Mr. and Mrs._____ ,

I am doing a follow-up on the children that attended my pre-first grade class last year. I am interested in their progress and success in first grade. Would you take a few minutes to answer three short questions.

1. How would you rate ___'s achievement this past year in first grade?

2. Do you feel pre-first grade has helped ___'s self-confidence at school?

3. Would you feel confident recommending the pre-first grade program to another parent whose child is facing retention in kindergarten?

Comments: (Please use the back)

Thank you for your time and would you mail this back to me at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Colleen Busta

PRE-FIRST GRADE

WHITTIER ELEMENTARY
GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

April 11, 1990

Dear _____:

_____ was in my Pre-first grade class at Whittier Elementary the past school year of 1988-89. I am trying to track _____'s progress in first grade. It will help me to evaluate the success of our Pre-first program. Would you take a few minutes to answer four short questions.

1. Where does _____ place academically with the other children in your class?

2. Which reading group has _____ been placed?

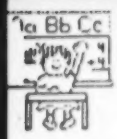
3. How would you rate _____'s self-confidence?

4. Do you see a difference between a child retained and one that has attended a Pre-first grade program?

Comments (please use the back of this page):

Thank you for your time and would you return this at your earliest convenience.

Colleen Busta



PRE-FIRST GRADE

WHITTIER ELEMENTARY
GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

April 20, 1990

Dear ___:

_____ was in my Pre-first grade class at Whittier Elementary. I am trying to track _____'s progress in second grade. It will help me to evaluate the success of our Pre-first program. Would you take a few minutes to answer four short questions.

1. Where does _____ place academically with the other children in your class?

2. Which reading group has _____ been placed?

3. How would you rate _____'s self-confidence?

4. Do you see a difference between a child retained and one that has attended a Pre-first grade program?

Comments (please use the back of this page):

Thank you for your time and would you return this at your earliest convenience.

Colleen Busta

PRE-FIRST GRADE

WHITTIER ELEMENTARY
GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

April 20, 1990

Dear ___:

_____ was in my Pre-first grade class at Whittier Elementary. I am trying to track _____'s progress in third grade. It will help me to evaluate the success of our Pre-first program. Would you take a few minutes to answer four short questions.

1. Where does _____ place academically with the other children in your class?

2. Which reading group has _____ been placed?

3. How would you rate _____'s self-confidence?

4. Do you see a difference between a child retained and one that has attended a Pre-first grade program?

Comments (please use the back of this page):

Thank you for your time and would you return this at your earliest convenience.

Colleen Busta

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